

SERIES: 1999-2000
Circular Letter: C-15

TO: Superintendents of School

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: March 31, 2000

SUBJECT: Documenting Efforts to Reduce Isolation:
"Evidence of Progress Over Time"

Connecticut has pioneered voluntary methods of reducing student isolation. Our Interdistrict Magnet Schools and the Interdistrict Cooperative Grants Program have attracted national attention. The state's vocational-technical high school system has thousands of students attending across school district lines. After the State Supreme Court's *Sheff v. O'Neill* decision we have added an interdistrict CHOICE program that allows urban students to attend suburban schools and vice versa on a space-available basis. State charter school laws have been changed to encourage interdistrict participation for the purpose of adding diversity in school enrollments. State grants for interdistrict programs designed to reduce isolation have steadily grown. We have created new initiatives such as bonus grants to districts receiving larger numbers of CHOICE students, construction grant bonuses for districts adding space for CHOICE students in the course of normal facilities improvements, and new funding options to support new school buildings that will be shared between neighboring districts. The State Department of Education provides diversity awareness training and a three-day institute on multicultural education at no cost to districts. Efforts to support minority teacher recruiting and retention are provided through the regional education service centers. A major new Federal grant will allow further expansion of these efforts by the State Department of Education.

The task of reducing racial, ethnic and economic isolation is still not an easy one. Connecticut remains a state comprised of towns and school districts that are not very diverse in terms of race and income. Yet the 1997 state legislation remains clear: Every district and every school in Connecticut must find ways of reducing the isolation of its students. Every year we expect each school and each district to do more. The statute's test is "evidence of progress over time."

Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-4a reads in part..."the educational interests of the state shall include but not be limited to, the concern of the state that...in order to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation, each school district shall provide educational opportunities for its students to interact with students and teachers from other racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds."

We have been communicating the importance of this effort through circular letters, in my annual meetings with superintendents and in a variety of other public and private forums; and every district has taken some steps to meet the new mandate. The strongest programs exist where there is a vision of diversity as a vital component in the educational excellence of the district.

We applaud all that has happened – **but it is not enough**. Each of us bears the responsibility of developing creative ways of reaching every child – and ensuring they are not educated in isolation.

As we get ready for the third data collection of information:

1. We need to increase the quality of the information school districts have been providing on the data collection on activities and programs to reduce isolation (ED539). State law requires this data collection. This information is regularly requested by the plaintiffs in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, and is frequently requested by the media.
2. The school and district Strategic School Profiles require a narrative summary of your ED539 submission. For the submission that summarizes this year's activities (1999-2000) – we will be asking you to describe the "evidence of progress over time" from 1997-98 (base year) through 1999-2000. You will be able to enter these narratives much earlier this year. Please ensure that it describes your progress and that it reflects all appropriate activities. As you know, these profiles and narratives are on our website; and will undoubtedly be used in the next phase of *Sheff v. O'Neill* and used by myself, the State Board of Education, the Governor and General Assembly in shaping future legislation and state funding.
3. I will be meeting with Superintendents and district staff in meetings at the six RESCs over the next several weeks in order to brief them on the data collection related to efforts to reduce isolation. Every district is expected to participate in one of these meetings. These meetings have been scheduled as indicated on the attached page.

At these meetings, RESC staff will provide training on filling out the ED539 data collection form. The data collection forms have been revised, based on input from districts, to ensure accuracy of response and ease of administration at the district level.

4. Districts are asked to submit the ED539 data collection forms to the Regional Education Service Centers on or before June 30, 2000.
5. The RESCs are asked to submit regional summaries based on district reports on or before September 1, 2000, to the State Department of Education.
6. Others sources of support such as diversity and multicultural education training, the CHOICE brochure, and lists of interdistrict programs are available to districts on request.

While I prefer not to focus on a district's noncompliance with this statutory duty – I am frequently asked – what are the consequences? We are motivated to action not only because of the state statute, but because of our belief in the clear educational value of all students learning with students from other backgrounds. I respond by noting that I expect that each board of education and Superintendent of Schools understands the statutory charge, the reporting burden and the test of “evidence of progress over time.” This Department, the public, the press, legislators and *Sheff* litigants will be reading your 1999-2000 summaries with an expectation of reasonable and significant efforts to establish and annually expand your programs to include more students, more time, in quality learning experiences. While there is no numerical measure in the state law, -- the goal, the requirement to take action, and the assessment of progress are stated in plain language. Any district failing to take action and failing to make progress over time is not meeting its obligation. My hope is that no district will be in this category.

Thank you for your attention to this very important issue.

TSS:fm
Attachment

**REGIONAL MEETINGS WITH THE COMMISSIONER
ABOUT DISTRICT EFFORTS TO REDUCE RACIAL ISOLATION**

Region and Location	Date and Time
Education Connection 355 Goshen Road Litchfield, CT 06759-0909 860-567-0863	April 24, 2000 10:00 A.M.
Cooperative Educational Services 25 Oakview Drive Trumbull, CT 06611 203-365-8803	April 25, 2000 1:00 P.M.
EASTCONN 376 Hartford Turnpike Hampton, CT 06247 860-455-0707	April 27, 2000 1:00 P.M.
Area Cooperative Educational Services 205 Skiff Street Hamden, CT 06517-1005 203-407-4417	April 28, 2000 1:00 P.M.
LEARN 44 Hatchetts Hill Road Old Lyme, CT 06371 860-434-4800	May 1, 2000 10:00 A.M.
Capitol Region Education Council 111 Charter Oak Avenue Hartford, CT 06106 860-524-4062	May 2, 2000 1:00 P.M.